PARTNERS

by Donna Jo Napoli

ALADDIN

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

For the grumpy ones among us, and those that make them smile

Thank you to all my family, Brenda Bowen, Karen Riskin, and Richard Tchen

Angel Talk

"Come on," said the Little Angel of Empathy. "Put the dough in the frying pan."

"The oil's not hot enough yet," said the Little Angel of Patience. "If we put the dough in too soon, it won't cook fast enough and the doughnuts will be all greasy."

"But I'm hungry. And doughnuts are greasy no matter what you do. Plus, I like grease. Everything greasy tastes better." The Little Angel of Empathy held a piece of dough over the pan. "Let me put it in now. Please."

"No."

The Little Angel of Empathy pushed her chin forward, right into the other little angel's face. "You're bossy."

"Huh? It's my job. I'm in charge of the kitchen this week."

"I don't like it when you're in charge." The Little Angel of Empathy's stomach growled. "Look over there!"

"What is it?" asked the Little Angel of Patience, turning his head.

The Little Angel of Empathy dropped her piece of dough into the oil. It spluttered.

"You're tricky," said the Little Angel of Patience. "And that wasn't even a good trick. Look." He pointed at the doughnut.

It sat there in the pan like a big old lump. It was cooking too slowly and sopping up all the oil. It looked sick. Just seeing it made the Little Angel of Empathy feel kind of sick too.

"It's going to be soggy and awful," said the Little Angel of Patience.

"I don't care." The Little Angel of Empathy flipped the doughnut over. That didn't seem to help much. Finally, she

scooped it out and put it on a piece of paper to dry. Then she sprinkled it with sugar and took a big bite.

"How is it?" asked the Little Angel of Patience.

The Little Angel of Empathy wiped the grease off her mouth. "You can make the rest of them yourself."

"But you promised to help."

"It takes too long," said the Little Angel of Empathy. "Anyway, you don't like my help." She walked out of the kitchen, holding the rest of her doughnut, and bumped smack into the Archangel of Empathy.

"Just who I was looking for," said the archangel. "I need your help."

"Well, it better not be in cooking," said the little angel. "I don't want to go back in that kitchen for the rest of the week."

"Why not?"

"Taste this." The little angel held out her doughnut.

The archangel took a bite. He chewed for a long time.

"Well?" said the Little Angel of Empathy. "Do you like it?"

"It's sweet," said the archangel.

"But is it good?" asked the little angel.

The archangel cleared his throat. Little bits of sugar glistened on his upper lip.

"Go ahead and tell the truth," said the little angel. "I know it, anyway. This doughnut is heavy and soggy. And I made it. And the Little Angel of Patience told me it would be awful if I put it in the oil too soon, but I did it anyway. And he was right, and I was wrong. And I don't want to talk to him anymore."

The Archangel of Empathy waited a moment, looking at the little angel as if he expected more words to come tumbling out of her. When she didn't say anything else, he asked softly, "Why did you put it in the oil too soon?"

"I'm not the patient one, he is."

"Oh. Well, you can't be mad at him for that."

"Yes, I can," said the Little Angel of Empathy. "He asked me whether it tasted good when he knew very well it didn't. So as long as the Little Angel of Patience has kitchen duty, I'm staying

out of the kitchen. If your chore involves cooking, you'd better find someone else."

"Actually, it isn't that kind of chore. It's an angel task. I know a child who needs to learn some empathy, and I think you're the right little angel to help him."

"Oh." The Little Angel of Empathy smiled. "Oh, it's a task I can earn feathers with." If the little angel got just a few more feathers, she'd earn her wings. Then a bell would ring, announcing the good news to everyone. "Well, then, let's not just stand here talking. Let's get to work."

"You're right, you certainly aren't the patient one, are you?" said the archangel. But he smiled, too.

Rabies

Drew sat on the grass. Jill and Faith sat nearby, combing their dolls' hair. Mom and Dad sat on the front step talking, or, rather, Mom was talking fast and loud and Dad was sitting there looking dazed. They were all waiting for the moving van to arrive with their stuff, so that they could carry it into their new house. But the van was late.

Drew moved closer to his sisters. He pulled up a handful of grass and threw it on them.

"What do you want?" said Jill.

"Nothing."

"Then get back," said Faith.

"I don't have anything to do." Drew scratched the underside of his knees. The grass made him itchy. "Let me play with your stupid dolls with you."

"They're not stupid," said Jill.

"You're stupid," said Faith.

Drew stuck out his tongue.

The moving van pulled up.

"Finally," said Mom. "Charge!" She ran at the van like a captain leading her troops into battle. Mom was usually sweet—really sweet—but she had gotten kind of wound up these last few days. Maybe moving wasn't good for her.

Drew carried all the boxes marked with a huge, red capital D into his bedroom. He had packed them and marked them himself, so he knew exactly where they should go—right in the center of his floor. He plopped them down, one after the other, in a nice, wide tower. When Drew finished, he walked back up the ramp into the moving van and looked around.

Dad had said that none of the kids were allowed to carry the furniture or the biggest boxes. But a few medium-sized boxes remained—all marked with F or J. His sisters' boxes. Drew reached for one.

"Don't you touch that." Jill came running up the ramp and whisked the box out from under Drew's hands. "Just what do you think you're doing?"

"I was going to help," said Drew.

"You never help," said Jill.

"Besides, I saw you throw your boxes into your room," said Faith, hurrying into the van. "You probably broke half your stuff. And I bet you were planning on breaking our stuff, too. Here, Jill, you carry the rest of your boxes in while I stand guard, and then I'll carry the rest of my boxes in while you stand guard."

The girls glowered at Drew.

Drew blew raspberries at them.

"Rrrrufff! Rrrrufff!" A dog appeared in the driveway.

"What a fat dog." Jill moved closer to Faith.

"Yuck, he looks old," said Faith.

Both of them moved deeper into the van.

Drew stood perfectly still, his eyes on that big dog. It was golden brown with long, wavy hair and wide, floppy ears and round, watery eyes. It looked sort of like an overgrown stuffed animal that had been beaten up over the years.

"Get back here, Drew," said Faith.

Drew shook his head. "He doesn't look mean."

"I'm the oldest," said Faith, "so I'm in charge. Get back here with us."

Drew didn't move.

Neither did the dog. He seemed to be waiting. All at once he stood on his hind legs and jumped around.

"Crazy dog," screamed Jill.

"Rabies," shouted Faith. "Get away! Shoo, you ugly thing!"

The dog gave a weird, strangled sort of whine and loped off.

Drew leaned out of the end of the van to see where the dog had gone.

“Don’t do that,” said Faith. “He might be waiting to pounce.”

But the dog wasn’t waiting to pounce. He walked slowly across the street and up the walk to the house opposite theirs. He climbed the steps and slumped down onto the front porch.

Drew jumped out of the van and hid around the side.

In a few minutes, Faith and Jill came cautiously out onto the ramp, holding hands.

“Rrrrufff!” barked Drew, jumping out at them.

They screamed and ran into the house.

Angel Talk

"I thought you said there was only one child I was supposed to help." The Little Angel of Empathy walked through the backyard of the family's new house. "And instead I've got to help two, and they both play with dolls, and I don't like dolls, and, well, they're both mean." The little angel ran her hand along a hedge of hibiscus bushes. "And then there's that dog. I'm not fond of dogs, especially big ones like that. I didn't get close enough to it to be sure, but it probably smells bad. Plus, it's noisy."

The Archangel of Empathy strolled along beside the little angel as though he didn't have a care in the world.

The Little Angel of Empathy jumped ahead and planted herself right in the archangel's path. "Well, aren't you going to say anything?"

The archangel smiled. "I was just giving you a chance to finish talking. Are you through?"

The little angel flushed. She did have a habit of talking too much. She nodded.

"First of all, I didn't realize how you felt about dogs. If you don't want this task, if you're really afraid, I can give it to someone else."

The little angel touched the middle of a flower. Yellow pollen coated her fingertip. "I don't like the idea of being a quitter before I've even tried, but, well, does that dog really have rabies?"

"Not at all. He's just an old dog."

"Oh." The little angel sniffed at the flower, careful to keep her nose away from the pollen. A mild sweetness filled the air. "Florida is interesting. It's already the middle of December and there are still flowers all over the place. I like it here."

"Does that mean you want this task, after all?"

"I guess so. But I'm staying away from that dog. And I should get double the number of feathers since I have two children to help."

"The girls aren't your task, little angel," said the Archangel of Empathy. "It's Drew who needs help."

"Drew? But those girls are so mean to him."

"Hmmm." The archangel rubbed his chin in mock consternation. "Imagine, the girls acted like that when Drew didn't do anything."

"All right, all right. I admit he's bratty, throwing grass and sticking out his tongue and everything. But in my opinion, they deserve it. Plus, Faith is awful. She acted as bossy as the Little Angel of Patience in the kitchen this morning."

"Bossiness really gets to you, doesn't it? We're going to have to talk about that, I think."

"Ahhhh!" came a scream from the house.

"But we'd better talk later," said the archangel. "Now it's time for work."

Hair

Drew ran into his room and shut the door. He climbed to the top of his tower of boxes and sat with his back to the door and put both hands over his ears. He couldn't hear the screaming anymore.

Someone pushed him in the middle of his back.

Drew turned around, with his hands still over his ears.

Jill shouted at him. He couldn't be sure of what she was saying, because his ears were plugged like that, but he knew it wasn't good. And now she pinched him on the leg. Really hard.

Drew had no choice: He had to take his hands away from his ears so he could defend himself. He yanked on Jill's arm until she stopped pinching.

"You ruined her." Jill held up her doll. The doll's hair stuck out in all different lengths. "I know you did it, so don't lie. My scissors were sitting on the ground right beside her. Only you would be dumb enough to leave the evidence behind."

Drew tilted his head to get a different angle on the doll. "You're always doing things to your doll's hair. So I did, too. She looks good now."

"She looks bad," Faith said from the doorway.

"She's ruined," said Jill. "And you're horrible."

"She's punk," said Drew. "If you dye her hair purple, I bet she'll be a lot more popular this way."

"If you dare to do anything else to her hair, I'll tell Mom," said Jill.

They could all hear Mom banging around in the kitchen, jamming pots and pans here and there. Only an idiot would want to bring Mom into things, the way she was acting now. On the

other hand, it was never a good idea to give in to Jill. "I could do things to your hair, instead," said Drew.

"That's it," said Faith. "Out. You get out of this house right now."

"You can't tell me what to do," said Drew. But he was already climbing down from his tower.

"Since when? Mom put me in charge while she's fixing up the kitchen. And I say out. Out out out!"

Drew ran past his sisters and down the hall. He darted out the front door. But then he didn't know what to do next. He stood on the step for a moment and looked around. It was a Saturday. In his old neighborhood the kids his age would all be out in their yards or on the sidewalk. They'd be riding bikes and skateboards, and climbing trees to shout to each other from their forts. His old neighborhood was fun.

But there was no one in any of the yards around here. And no one on the sidewalks. And Mom had told him not to ride his bike unless Jill or Faith went with him, because she didn't want him getting lost. That was the rule until he knew his way around.

Moving was lousy.

Jill and Faith were lousy.

Drew ran back to his room. The girls were safely off somewhere. He opened a box and riffled through it. But his basketball wasn't in there. So he opened a second box. He threw everything out of it, onto the still bare mattress. But his basketball wasn't in the second box, either.

"Oh, Drew." Mom stood in the hall and wiped the sweat off her forehead. Her eyes were bright, and she looked slightly crazed. "I was just checking to see if you were unpacking. I was sure I'd have to yell at you. And there you are, working away like a little beaver. Keep it up." She smiled and disappeared.

Drew looked at the rest of the boxes. It could take an hour to find his basketball. Yuck. He peeked out his door. Something was lying on the floor halfway down the hall. He went and picked it up. A clothespin. Well, okay.

Drew ran out the front door again. There was a stand of pine trees on one side. He could play he was in the wilderness. But most of the pine trees had pretty skinny trunks. On the other side of the yard was a fat ficus tree. That was good. Drew zipped behind the ficus. He squatted and listened hard. No sound from the wild forest animals. Probably they were sneaking up, silent and deadly. Snakes and lions and monsters. He jumped out from behind the tree and pointed the clothespin. "Bang!" he shouted. "Bang bang bang!"

"Rrrrufff!" That old dog was on his porch again, across the street. He stood up now and barked some more. "Ruff ruff ruff!"

Drew dashed for the bushes and scrambled under them. He had a perfect view of the dog's front porch from here. Now there was a true wild beast.

The dog slowly walked down the steps. He seemed to be moving carefully, as though all his muscles ached. He lumbered down his front walk. Then he crossed the street. He was coming right for Drew.

Drew yelped and ran to his front door. He stood with one hand on the doorknob and watched the dog over his shoulder.

The dog was now in the middle of Drew's front walk. He stopped, and then put both his right paws forward. Then he stepped back on both his left paws. He scrambled his paws around like a maniac. Now he put both his left paws backward. Then he stepped forward on both his right paws. And he scrambled around again. He stretched his neck toward Drew. "Mrrrrugh," he said, like a very sick cat. "Mrrrugh, mrrrugh."

Drew screamed and ran inside.

Angel Talk

"You were right," said the Little Angel of Empathy. She sat high up on a branch of the same tree that Drew had been hiding behind earlier. The Archangel of Empathy sat beside her, swinging his legs. The little angel swung her legs, too. "Drew needs help. He destroyed that doll's hair. And he thought it looked good. He's got bad taste."

"Bad taste, is that what you think?" The Archangel of Empathy put a finger out in the path of an inchworm making its way along a wide, shiny leaf. The inchworm poked its front end around a little while, then happily climbed onto the archangel's finger.

"Don't tell me you liked the way that doll looked." The little angel giggled. "You have bad taste, too."

The archangel smiled. "That's not what I mean. Are you so sure that Drew cut the doll's hair in order to make it look good?"

"That's what he said. He wanted the doll to look punk. Why else would he do it?"

"Exactly. Why else?"

The Little Angel of Empathy watched the inchworm creep up the archangel's wrist. "He's looking for food and he's going to be disappointed."

"What?" The archangel looked confused. "Drew didn't say he was hungry."

"I'm talking about the inchworm. You'd better put him back on a leaf."

"Ah." The Archangel of Empathy held his wrist beside a leaf, and with his other hand he gently nudged the inchworm toward the leaf. "You can understand this inchworm, but you don't seem to be understanding Drew."

The little angel sat up straight. “People are a lot more complicated than inchworms.”

“Sure. But if you look at them closely, if you watch them, the way you watched this inchworm, you can tell a lot about them.”

The Little Angel of Empathy thought about how Drew looked. His own hair was rather wild, and his clothes were an ordinary T-shirt and shorts. A little dirty, in fact. “Actually, I doubt Drew cares one bit about hairstyles or anything else having to do with looks. He must have cut that doll’s hair for some other reason.”

“That’s what I think, too.”

“But, why?”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out, little angel.”

“Well, I’d better figure it out, and fast. That dog makes me anxious. He keeps bothering Drew. And he does the strangest things. Did you see what he did with his feet? Are you sure he doesn’t have rabies?”

“I’m sure.”

“Well, I wish he wasn’t around. He’s crazy. And I’ve got enough to do just thinking about Drew’s problems without having to worry about a dog,” said the little angel. “I’m going to find out why Drew cut that doll’s hair. Then maybe I’ll be able to help him.”

Chalk

There was something really wonderful about cheddar cheese. Drew cut one more slice and put it into the very middle of his already full sandwich. Then he put the sandwich into the little electric sandwich maker and set the timer for three minutes. Three minutes always made a perfect melted cheese sandwich.

Dad was at the sink, washing up from lunch. Everyone except Drew had already eaten and left. But Drew was late because he had stood in the living room watching the front walk through the window until that old dog finally turned around and went back across the street to his porch. Then he had gone to his room to search for his basketball again. He'd opened two more boxes, with no luck, before hunger finally led him to the kitchen.

The smell of the melting cheese was wonderful. Cheddar was great on macaroni, too. And it was great on apple pie. And it was great dipped in mustard. And it was great just plain. Drew cut a tip off the block of cheese and popped it into his mouth. "You did a good job shopping, Dad."

Dad practically jumped at the sound of Drew's voice. Then he turned around and smiled. "Thanks. It's a relief to hear a positive word."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, all this moving. It's kind of changed your mom. This might be a case of temporary insanity."

Right then Mom called from somewhere in the back of the house—but it wasn't a normal call. It was wavery, as though it was about to turn into a shriek. "Matt, I need your help with these shelves."

"Coming." Dad scratched his head. "Now all I have to do is find the toolbox first," he muttered.

"Go look for it. I can finish up my lunch by myself."

"Thanks, son." Dad zipped out into the hall.

"Good luck," called Drew. Dad would need it. He was not the most organized person.

Drew looked slowly around the kitchen. Dishes were stacked on the counter. Drawers were halfway open. Boxes sat everywhere, some of them still untouched, and others with stuff hanging over the sides. It wasn't a pretty picture. It would take forever to get this place in order. And if there was one thing Mom didn't like, it was disorder.

"Temporary insanity"—that's what Dad had said. Wasn't that used as a defense in lawsuits sometimes? It was definitely a good idea for Drew to stay out of Mom's way for the rest of the day. He should go outside.

Drew took his sandwich out of the sandwich maker and ate it as he walked back into the living room and looked out the window. The old dog was sleeping in the sun on his porch. And, what was that? Jill and Faith were on their knees on the sidewalk.

Drew went outside and stood behind his sisters. "What are you doing?"

Jill put down her pink chalk and picked up a green one. "What does it look like?"

They had drawn a giant castle with four big turrets and a tall pink horse pawing the ground beside it. Near the horse was a woman in a long gown.

"Why's the horse pink?"

"Why do you stink?" said Jill. Jill had a way with words.

Drew didn't have a way with words. He picked up a piece of blue chalk.

"Don't even think about it," said Faith.

Drew leaned over and made a big curling mustache on the woman.

"You ruined it," said Jill.

"She's pretty now," said Drew. "And a lot more interesting. She could get a job in a circus."

"She's ugly now," said Faith. She stood up. "Come on, Jill. Mom said we should arrange all the towels and sheets in the linen closet. And you," she said, looking at Drew, "you can't help."

Drew didn't want to help. But he didn't like them saying he couldn't. He followed them up the walk, wishing he could think of something clever to say.

They went inside and shut the door in his face.

Drew kicked the door. "Mustache!" he shouted. That had kind of a nice ring to it. Maybe he'd put a pox on his sisters and they'd both have mustaches, like the chalk woman. He turned around and sat on the step.

The only interesting thing in this yard was that ficus tree. Drew got up and went to the tree. He broke off a small branch and stripped it until it was a good stick. Then he got to work digging a hole. A hole would be a good place to hide. And he still had his clothespin in his pocket, and clothespins could be used for all sorts of things. They even made nice noises if you snapped them quick. So with a good hole, he'd be ready for anything.

"Grrrrgl," came the growl. But it wasn't really a growl. It was more like a sort of gurgle.

Drew looked around.

The old dog stood on Drew's front walk. His nose and front paws were covered with dirt. And between his jaws was a big bone with clumps of dirt clinging to it.

Drew stood up slowly. He didn't want to excite this berserk dog, especially since the dog stood between Drew and the front door. He walked sideways, like a crab, keeping his eyes on the dog, moving in a big arc toward the door.

The dog dropped the bone. He looked at Drew and wagged his tail. Then he jumped. That dog actually jumped, with all four paws off the ground at once. He jumped forward and backward. And now he wiggled his whole body.

Drew couldn't stand it anymore. He ran for the front door.

Angel Talk

"I'm starting to get it," said the Little Angel of Empathy, walking around the hole that Drew had dug. "Jill and Faith wouldn't let Drew play dolls with him, and they sat there combing the dolls' hair. So he cut off one of the doll's hair. Then Jill and Faith wouldn't let Drew draw with them. And so he put a mustache on the pretty lady they'd drawn." The little angel stooped and smoothed the dirt inside the hole. "When Drew feels left out, he messes up the things his sisters are doing."

"You got it," said the Archangel of Empathy. "That's exactly what I think, too."

"But how can I help him?" asked the little angel. "This seems more like a job for the Little Angel of Self-control."

"Drew has plenty of control over himself," said the archangel. "He doesn't do these things in a tantrum or anything like that. He does them on purpose."

"Well, then, maybe he needs the help of the Little Angel of Kindness." The little angel brushed off her hands and looked across the street. "That dog must be inside for the night." She squinted her eyes. "Can we go look around his yard?"

"Why?"

"I think I see something." The little angel walked across the street.

The Archangel of Empathy walked beside her. "Tell me, little angel. You said this might be a job for the Little Angel of Kindness. Do you really think Drew is mean?"

The little angel was taken aback at the question. She stopped and looked the archangel in the face. Kids called each other mean all the time, and the little angel had actually called Drew's sisters mean after the first time she'd seen them. But it was a totally

different thing when an archangel used a word like that. It was serious. The little angel had to take this question very seriously. "He does some mean things," she said slowly. "Things that make his sisters feel bad."

"And if you make someone feel bad on purpose, is that being mean?"

"Sometimes. But I don't think he's doing it to get pleasure out of being mean. He feels bad—because they leave him out. So he wants them to feel bad, too."

"Yes," said the Archangel of Empathy, "yes, that sounds right. And why do you think they leave him out?"

"I'd guess it's because he's younger and he does a lot of jerky things. It's a vicious circle. The girls leave Drew out, so he does something bad to them, so they leave him out, and then it starts all over again. And with this move, it's even worse, because those girls have each other, but Drew has no one. He's lonely. Poor Drew."

"You called him a brat before."

"That was when I didn't know why he acted like that," said the little angel.

"You really do understand him," said the Archangel of Empathy. "You're getting inside his feelings. You have empathy for him."

The little angel let those words hang in the air a moment. "Oh, I see now. Because I understand why Drew acts the way he does, I don't think he's a brat anymore." The little angel felt a surge of happiness. "It's so simple. If I can get Drew to understand why his sisters act the way they do, if I can get him to have empathy for them, then maybe he won't want to hurt them anymore. Maybe he can even become friends with them."

"That sounds like a plan," said the archangel. "An angelic plan."

The Little Angel of Empathy smiled wide. But then she remembered Drew's angry kick when his sisters shut the door in his face. "The plan may be simple, but carrying it out won't be. I

don't know where to begin. It'll be hard to get Drew to even want to understand his sisters."

"That's why I called you in to help, little angel. Big tasks call for little angels." They were now standing in the front yard of the dog's house. The archangel looked around. "What is it you thought you saw over here?"

"These holes. Look." The little angel pointed to two holes. "And see?" She pointed to a bone on the front porch.

"He dug up a bone this afternoon and then another one tonight," said the archangel. "He must be a hungry dog."

"Maybe not," said the little angel, looking over the bone carefully. It hadn't been gnawed on. A shiver ran up her spine. "I think I understand something about this dog." She was breathless with excitement now. "And, oh, I'm getting an idea of where to begin."

Bones

Drew opened his eyes and sat up in bed. He felt out of place, lost almost. Then he realized he was in his new bedroom, in his new house. Dad had read to him last night, while Mom arranged his things in his drawers and closet. Then they'd kissed him and turned out the light, and he'd fallen asleep immediately. He couldn't even remember dreaming.

He looked at the clock on the bureau. It was almost seven. He got dressed and went to the bathroom. Then he headed for the kitchen.

Mom sat in a chair with her head on the kitchen table, asleep. Dad sat beside her drinking a cup of coffee. When he saw Drew, he put his fingers to his lips in the hush sign. "She was up half the night, putting things away," he whispered. "When we woke this morning, she came in here and fell asleep again."

"Is she still temporarily insane?" whispered Drew.

"No. And doesn't the place look grand?"

The boxes were gone. The counters were clear. The drawers and cupboards were closed. "The kitchen looks perfect," whispered Drew.

Dad smiled. "Have a bowl of cereal and I'll go wake your sisters. Then I'll drive all of you to school on my way to work, since it's your first day at the new school. Tomorrow you can take the bus."

Drew had three bowls of Grape-Nuts with chunks of banana cut up in them. Then he got his backpack, which Mom had stocked with papers and pencils, and went to sit outside on the front step while he waited for his sisters. That was the routine they used to follow in their old house, so he might as well do the same thing here.

When Drew opened the front door, he gasped. A pile of dirty white things was stacked on the front step. Drew bent over to examine them. Yes, they were bones. He looked across the street.

Sure enough, that dog was on the front porch and he was watching him. That dog was definitely looking right at Drew. Drew didn't know what to do. So he just stood there.

The dog gallumphed down his steps and loped across the street. He came up Drew's walk.

Drew could hardly breathe. He held his backpack in front of himself for protection. And he kept one hand on the doorknob behind him, ready to jump inside if need be.

The dog came right up to the step and dropped another bone on the pile. He wagged his tail and waited.

Drew took a deep breath at last. "What are you up to, Dog?"

The dog turned around and went back across the street. He returned a few minutes later with another bone.

Drew gave a half smile.

The dog brought another bone. Then another.

"You look nice." Faith stood beside Drew. She straightened the sleeve on his shirt. "Hey, what's going on? Bones. Oh, no, that dog again. Mom!" she shouted. "Dad! Help!"

Mom and Dad and Jill came running to the door.

"Our neighbors across the street have a mad dog," said Faith. "You'd better call the police."

Dad looked at the dog, who was standing on his own porch now. "He doesn't look mad."

"Where did all these bones come from?" asked Mom.

"The dog's mad," said Faith. "I bet these are human bones."

"I agree with Dad," said Drew. "He doesn't look mad to me. Let's go to school."

Angel Talk

"Now I don't get it," said the archangel. "What's that dog doing?"

"Think about it," said the little angel. "Yesterday that goofy dog dug up a bone and carried it across the street while Drew was digging a hole."

"So?"

"Don't you see? The dog must have thought Drew was digging for a bone. So he dug one up and brought it over."

The archangel grinned. "How amazing. That dog was giving a present."

"Yes. And when Drew didn't take it, the dog went back home and dug up another one. We saw it on his porch last night. I was pretty sure then that he was planning on giving it to Drew."

"How could you guess?" asked the archangel.

"I examined it for teeth marks. He hadn't chewed on it at all." The Little Angel of Empathy hugged herself and twisted side to side in pride. "The dog thought one bone wasn't enough. So he was going to give a second one."

The Archangel of Empathy gave a little whistle of admiration. "You should be a detective. But why did the dog dig up so many more bones?"

"Well, I had a part in that. I thought about it a lot. If Drew couldn't even figure out why his sisters always leave him out, then he'd never be able to figure out why a dog dropped a bone or two on his step. But if the dog dropped a whole bunch of bones, then even Drew would have to start thinking about it a little, right?" The little angel smiled up at the archangel with glee. "So I got the dog to dig up lots of bones."

"How?"

“I pulled him by the collar all around his yard this morning. And every time he stopped, I started to dig a hole, and then he took over and dug deeper, and each time a bone was there.”

“You pulled that great big dog by the collar?” The Archangel of Empathy jerked back in surprise. “I thought you were afraid of him.”

“I was. Until yesterday. When I got to thinking about all the things he’d done, I realized he wasn’t scary after all. He only seems scary because no one understands him.”

“But you do understand him?” asked the archangel.

“I think so. And I’m going to try to help Drew understand him. It will be his first lesson in empathy.”

“Very strange,” said the archangel, “very strange, indeed. But it’s interesting. I can’t wait to see what happens next.”

Talent

Faith and Jill laughed as they ran down the hall.

Drew came out of his room and followed them.

"Stay inside, Drew." Faith pushed Drew in the center of his chest.

"Why? Where are you going?"

"Into the yard," said Faith.

"We're going to practice for the Winter Break Talent Show," said Jill. "That way, everyone will learn our names and everyone will like us."

"I know about the talent show," said Drew. "My teacher talked about it today. I want to be in the talent show, too."

"You can't," said Jill. "You don't have any talent."

"I do, too."

Faith patted Drew's shoulder, almost as though she was his buddy. "Listen, Drew. Go back to your room. We'll call you to come be our audience as soon as we're ready."

Drew shook off Faith's hand. "Don't try to pretend like you're being nice. No one lets me do anything around here."

"That's 'cause you're little and icky," said Jill. "You're as icky as that slobbery old dog."

Faith opened the front door. "Please don't ruin things. Go back to your room, Drew." The girls went outside.

"I'm not icky," Drew shouted, standing in the doorway. "And Dog's not icky, either."

"Rrrrufff!" came the bark from across the street. The dog got to his feet.

"That's right, Dog," shouted Drew. "You just bark at them."

"Ruff ruff ruff," the dog barked ferociously.

The girls screamed and ran around the side of the house to the backyard.

Drew looked at the dog.

The dog stood on his porch and looked back.

Drew shut the door and went to his room. His spelling homework lay on his desk, where he'd put it when he got home.

The first day at his new school hadn't been bad at all. No one had acted like a friend. But no one had hit him, either. No one had even picked on him. It was a pretty nice school. And his teacher smiled a lot.

"Drew, honey?" Mom came into the room carrying a poster. "I found this behind the couch. Is it yours?"

It was a circus scene of a man standing in a cage in front of a line of lions that were perched on little stools. The man held a chair in one hand, and with the other he cracked a whip in front of the middle lion, who was clawing the air and roaring. The audience sat in bleachers all around, staring anxiously at the lion tamer.

"I've never seen it before," said Drew.

"Neither have the girls. And I'm sure it's not your father's." Mom shrugged. "I'll throw it out."

"No, I want it," said Drew. He loved circuses. Why, just yesterday he had thought about how that mustache chalk woman would look great in the circus. "I'll hang it on my wall."

"Okay." Mom leaned the poster against the side of Drew's desk. "Do you have a lot of homework?"

"Just spelling."

"You can do it after dinner, then. Go outside and play now, before it gets too dark."

Mom believed in outdoor play. It was one of the best things about her. But if Drew went outside, he'd hear Jill and Faith in the backyard. And if he tried to see what they were doing, they'd gang up on him again.

"I think I'll stay inside," said Drew.

"Are you afraid of that dog? I told you, Mrs. Martin, the woman across the street, swears he'd never hurt anyone. He's just

a sad, old dog."

"Why's he sad?"

"He misses his old owner, Mrs. Martin's daughter. She moved into the city to become a ballroom dancing teacher. He used to spend all his time with her. Now he spends all his time alone on the porch." Mom smiled reassuringly. "I'm sure if you don't bother him, he won't bother you."

A dog who had no one to play with. Drew understood that feeling, all right. He looked down at the poster. The lions were tawny, almost the same color as that dog. And now Drew got an idea. "Okay, I'll go outside."

"Good." Mom kissed Drew on the forehead and left.

Drew picked up his desk chair and carried it outside. He stood on his step. "Dog," he called. "Hello, dog."

The dog was lying with his chin on the porch floor. He lifted his head and he looked alert enough. But he didn't get up.

Drew walked across the street, carrying his chair with the legs pointed out in front of him, just like the lion tamer held the chair in the poster. That way if Mom was wrong and the dog attacked, he could fend him off.

The dog watched Drew approach. He didn't move.

"Ummmm, dog? Hi." Drew didn't go up the porch stairs. Instead, he walked to the side of the porch and leaned forward until he could see the tags on the dog's collar. The red one was a rabies tag. The silver one had a name and a phone number.

"'Rodney,'" read Drew. "What a funny name for a dog."

Rodney thumped his tail on the floor.

"You like it when I say your name, don't you? Rodney, Rodney, Rodney."

Rodney's tail thumped faster.

"It's a good name," said Drew. "Okay, Rodney. Let's play I'm the tamer. I'm going to tame you. Then we can do it as an act in the talent show. Everyone loves an act with an animal in it." Drew walked backward. "Come on, Rodney. Follow me." He crossed the street, checking over his shoulder.

Rodney followed hesitantly.

When they were both in Drew's front yard, Drew stopped. He shook the chair at Rodney. "Okay, act wild."

Rodney cringed and lay down.

"No. You've got the wrong idea. The chair's not supposed to make you afraid. It's supposed to make you mad. You have to jump at it and act like you want to eat me." Drew shook the chair again.

Rodney's eyes were huge. He stared up at Drew.

"Oh, all right." Drew put the chair down and ran over to the pine trees. He picked up a pinecone and ran back. "Listen, Rodney, you roar. Then I'll do hypnosis and put you to sleep. That'll be a great act, too." Drew stood on the chair and held the pinecone up to his mouth, like a microphone. "Go ahead, roar."

Rodney sat up. He looked around worriedly. It was as though he knew Drew wanted him to do something, but he couldn't figure out what.

"Okay, okay, we'll skip the roaring part. I'll go first. I'll wave my hands in front of your face. Then you fall asleep. Just lie down, like you did a minute ago. Okay?" Drew spread his arms. "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the show." He bowed.

Rodney stood up.

Drew waved his hands in front of Rodney's face.

Rodney just stood there.

Angel Talk

"This is very good." The Archangel of Empathy patted the little angel on the shoulder. "You're doing fine."

"Don't do that." The little angel jumped away.

"Don't do what?"

"You patted me just like Faith patted Drew. I know you didn't mean it like she did, but it gave me the creeps. Faith is so bossy, telling Drew he can't be in the talent show."

The Archangel of Empathy sighed. "Did you listen to what Faith said? She gave a reason why."

"I know, I know. She thought he'd ruin their act if he was part of it." The Little Angel of Empathy frowned. "But so what if he did? It's just a little talent show."

"She's the oldest child in the family," said the archangel. "She feels responsible for how they present themselves to the new school."

The little angel wanted to protest, but she remembered now how Faith had straightened Drew's shirt before school that morning. Faith wanted all of them to look their best on their very first day. "Does she always feel in charge?"

"Maybe. It's hard for the oldest child in a family," said the archangel.

The little angel thought about having to feel like you were in charge all the time. If things went wrong, then it would be your fault. How awful. Maybe that's what made people in charge act so bossy. Maybe that's why the Little Angel of Patience had been so bossy about how to cook the doughnuts. He was in charge of the kitchen this week, after all. The little angel felt suddenly blue. She sniffed.

"Wait a minute, are you sad? Don't be sad. We have other things to think about now—things to celebrate. Drew's playing with the dog. At some level he understands that the dog wants to be friends. That's great."

"It's a start," the little angel said, perking up again. "But the dog's not acting right. I was certain that he'd be a wonderful circus lion. Instead, he's terrible as a lion."

"Ah, so you're the one who put that circus poster behind the couch." The archangel folded his arms at the chest. "I can understand why you'd want Drew to have a part in the talent show, but why a lion act? Rodney seems about as much like a lion as a little pussycat is."

"That's not true." The Little Angel of Empathy kicked the dirt in frustration. "You saw how the dog stood on his hind legs and flailed around when the kids were in the moving van." The little angel put her hands up and mimicked the dog. "And then he threw himself around again when Drew was playing near the ficus tree. You remember—all that forward-and-backward stuff with scrambling around in the middle, like this." The little angel stepped forward on her right foot, then back on her left, then she stamped in place a few times, then back on her left foot and forward on her right, then she stamped in place. "And then Rodney actually jumped when he dropped the first bone on Drew's walk. And he wiggled his body. He can be a real lunatic at times. So I thought he'd make a good lion."

The archangel stared at the little angel. "You're good at those dog moves."

"Well, it's sort of fun," said the Little Angel of Empathy. "When I jumped, I felt just like I was doing the Bunny Hop. Do you know that dance?"

"Yes. I did it when I was a little angel, too. And when you did that forward-and-back thing, you looked like you were doing the cha-cha. You know, one, two, then one-two-three real fast."

"And that first crazy step was sort of like the rumba. Oh!" The Little Angel of Empathy danced around the archangel. "It's all so clear now. Rodney's a dancer."

The archangel laughed. “Don’t be silly.”

“You heard what Drew’s mother said. Rodney’s owner, Mrs. Martin’s daughter, teaches ballroom dancing. I bet she used to practice with Rodney. Wow, have I got an idea.”

“And I can’t wait to see it,” said the archangel.

Dancing

Drew sat on the chair with Rodney standing beside him. He'd been racking his brains, trying to think of some other act for the talent show. He'd thought of being a snake charmer, but Rodney was as lousy at being a snake as he was at being a lion. He'd thought of riding Rodney, standing on his back like an acrobat on a horse. But the old dog didn't look sturdy enough for that. He'd thought of simply having Rodney be a dog—a plain, old dog—who could do lots of tricks. But when he asked Rodney to do tricks, Rodney just looked at him. The dog didn't even know how to shake hands. Nothing would work. "That's it, Rodney," Drew said at last. "I can't come up with any other ideas for the two of us."

Rodney wagged his tail. Every time Drew said his name, he wagged his tail. Well, that was something, at least. But who wanted to see a dog wag his tail?

"Look, Rodney, I'm sorry I brought you over here. I thought we'd be great partners, but I'll just have to think of an act without you." Drew thought and thought. His throat felt funny, as though someone was stroking the front of it. He put his hand on his neck. His ears felt funny, as though there was a tiny voice singing in it. Singing, sure, that was a good idea. Drew was a fine singer. He got up and stood on the chair again. He held the pinecone-microphone in front of his mouth. "And now, ladies and gentlemen, the great Drew will sing." Drew sang into the pinecone. "Did you ever see a lassie, a lassie, a lassie . . ."

Rodney gave a little "Wuff" and moved around Drew's chair in great, wide steps.

Drew tried to ignore the wacked-out dog. He sang a little louder and a little faster.

Rodney's steps got a little wider and a little faster.

What was going on? Whatever it was, it was kind of cool. Drew sang faster and faster.

Rodney moved faster and faster.

This was really cool now. Drew finally stopped. "Wow, Rodney," he said.

Rodney wagged his tail.

"Was that smelly old dog dancing?" Jill stood by the corner of the house and gaped.

"It looked like the waltz to me," said Faith. "I learned that at the recreation center last summer."

Drew cleared his throat. "Presenting Rodney, the dancing dog." He sang, "I'm a little teapot short and stout."

Rodney danced.

"Hey, that's a real dance, too," said Faith. "It's the Charleston."

Drew sang, "Row row row your boat."

Rodney pushed his head against Drew's legs.

Drew got off the chair.

Rodney jumped up and put his front paws on Drew's shoulders. They danced across the grass while Drew sang.

"The tango," squealed Faith. "That's the tango." She clapped.

Jill clapped, too. "That dog isn't half as ugly when he dances."

"We're going to be in the talent show," said Drew.

"You'll be the best act," said Jill. "We're just doing somersaults and cartwheels and stuff."

The best act. Jill had just said that Drew and Rodney would be the best act.

"Everyone will love your act," said Faith. She walked cautiously up to Rodney. "Rodney? Is that your name?" She gave him a tentative pat.

Rodney wagged his tail. Rodney liked Faith. And why not? She was acting nice. And so was Jill.

"Maybe we can all do one big act together," said Drew. "I need people to dance with Rodney, anyway, because I have to sing."

"Faith's the one who knows how to dance," said Jill. "I never took lessons."

“I can teach you,” said Faith. “Then we can take turns.”

“Some dances are for more than two partners, anyway,” said Drew. “How about the hokeypokey?”

So Drew stood on the chair while Rodney and Jill and Faith circled him. He sang, and they danced. And Rodney’s tags clinked together in a sweet jingle jangle, the perfect accompaniment to Drew’s song.

Angel Thoughts

The newest Archangel of Empathy did a little jive routine in the air. That's the dance she'd always liked the best. Her wings had feathered out fully when Rodney's tags had clinked together like a bell. It really was a wonderful sound. She'd like to stick around and watch the dancers and listen to the singer and maybe try to learn a few more dances herself. But she could fly back later.

Right now there was a kitchen she had to go to, with a little angel in charge. The newest Archangel of Empathy was going to offer to help. And when that Little Angel of Patience told her what to do, she was going to listen and follow directions carefully. After all, the kitchen was his responsibility this week, and he wanted things to turn out just right. The newest Archangel of Empathy understood that entirely.

Meet the Little Angel of Persistence in Aladdin

Angelwings

No.16 Hang in There

Angel Talk

The Little Angel of Persistence stood in front of the mirror and fixed his eyes on his own face. He wouldn't allow his gaze to drift down to his feet. He tried again: shuffle, ball, change. Those were the tap-dance steps he was trying to master. And his tap-dancing videotape said it was best not to look at your feet as you practiced the steps.

Tap dancing was fun, but it was hard. Dancing had become the rage among the little angels, ever since that new archangel had shown them all how to do jive. Jive was fun, too. And it wasn't as hard as tap. At least, the Little Angel of Persistence didn't find it as hard.

But there was something that made tap better than jive in the little angel's opinion. Something that made tap simply wonderful. It was the intricate rhythms, the way a short pattern of beats could be added onto another pattern and another pattern, and then the whole thing could be repeated, and then slightly changed, and it could all just keep going in one big, glorious dance. Wow. When the little angel even thought about tap, he got happy. That was all there was to it.

The little angel tried again: shuffle, ball, change. He was slow and clunky at it.

He went over to the VCR and took out his lesson videotape and put in his favorite videotape of famous tap dancers. There was Fred Astaire, lightly tapping across the stage as Ginger Rogers smiled at him. There was Gene Kelly, giving perfect rhythms in the rain—even holding an umbrella as he tapped faster and faster. They both made tap dancing look so easy. And then there was the whole cast of that Broadway show that the little angel had seen in New York City, *STOMP,* just pounding away, having a grand old time.

Ah, well. The Little Angel of Persistence looked at his feet. They didn't look bad. But no one had ever called him graceful. That's because he wasn't graceful. And he wasn't fast, either.

He sat on the floor and unlaced his tap shoes.

"Little angel, there you are." The Archangel of Persistence came rushing in. "Are you busy?"

The little angel put his shoes back in the box he kept them in. "Not anymore."

"Were those tap shoes you had on?" The archangel peeked into the box. "I thought so. I love tap dancing."

"Are you good at it?" asked the little angel.

"Oh, I don't do it. I just meant I like to watch it."

"That's how I feel about it, too," said the Little Angel of Persistence.

The archangel put her finger to her lips. "But aren't these your tap shoes?"

"Yes. But I'm not going to use them anymore. It takes too long to learn, and I've got so many other really important things to do."

"What important things?" asked the Archangel of Persistence.

"For starters, the task that you have for me." The little angel gave a saucy smile and snapped his fingers. "Isn't that why you're here?"

"Well, yes," said the archangel. "But this task is a little complicated. It could take a while. So if you want to stay and work on your tap dancing, I could ask another little angel to help out."

"Does the child need to learn persistence?"

"Yes."

"Then I want the task." The little angel stroked his wings in satisfaction. He loved all the tasks the archangel had given him so far. He knew he'd love this one, too. Nothing was better than helping a child. "Hey," he said, looking at his wings as if for the first time. "I'm almost fully feathered. If I succeed at this task, I'll earn enough feathers to finish off my wings."

The archangel smiled. "That will be a delight. And I'll be happy to ring the bell that announces your wings myself."

About the Author

Donna Jo Napoli is the acclaimed and award-winning author of many novels, both fantasies and contemporary stories. She won the Golden Kite Award for *Stones in Water* in 1997. Her novel *Zel* was named an American Bookseller Pick of the Lists, a Publishers Weekly Best Book, a Bulletin Blue Ribbon, and a School Library Journal Best Book, and a number of her novels have been selected as ALA Best Books. She is a professor of linguistics at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, where she lives with her husband. Visit her at DonnaJoNapoli.com.

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